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ABSTRACT

For some students with mild or moderate disabilities, postsecondary education might include attendance at a community college, technical school, or 4-year college. From 1978 to 1991, the percentage of full-time college freshmen reporting disabilities more than tripled, with visual impairments and learning disabilities making up half the disabilities reported. For most students with disabilities, special education teachers create a protective environment during elementary and secondary school. However, this experience may inhibit student development of self-advocacy skills. Students must understand the differences between high school and college in order to be prepared for the reality of the college environment. Rather than fostering dependency, teachers in junior high and high school must encourage students to become independent thinkers, problem solvers, and responsible advocates for their own needs. Surveys of college students with disabilities from rural communities provide perspectives on the availability of support services on campus and advice on how high school students with disabilities can prepare themselves for college. Particularly important skills relate to self-advocacy, initiative, and time management. These skills can be used to address disability-related transition issues, such as self-reporting of disability, articulating accommodation needs, coordinating auxiliary assistance, and making living arrangements. This paper lists differences between high school and college environments, questions for teachers to assess student independence, and strategies to develop student decision-making skills. (SV)

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SUCCESSFUL TRANSITION: THE STUDENTS' PERSPECTIVE

Introduction

Rural schools and communities have unique strengths that can not be found in larger populated areas, such as the "closeness" of the community, and the feeling that "we take care of our own." However, when it comes to students preparing to leave the school environment, rural communities may still offer a perplexing array of community services, postsecondary programs, and employment possibilities. Adequate planning and preparation through the school years, as well as coordination with postsecondary and adult service personnel, can stop the confusion and provide a smooth transition to the options after high school. Regardless of the population being served, a successful transition is dependent on the partnerships of all parties involved in a coordinated, well planned journey.

It should not be assumed that all students with disabilities will immediately enter the work force upon completion of secondary school. Many students require additional training and education. For some students with mild or moderate disabilities, postsecondary education might include attendance at a community college, technical school, or a four-year college (Boyer-Stephens, 1992). Those students who choose postsecondary institutions must be able to access and advocate for the accommodations they need in order to be successful. This paper will discuss the increase in the number of students with disabilities attending postsecondary education; the different expectations between secondary and postsecondary environments; report on the perspectives of selected postsecondary students from rural Missouri high schools; and offer suggestions for postsecondary success.

College Freshmen

The literature supports the fact that the number of students with disabilities entering postsecondary institutions is increasing. Almost one in eleven full-time freshmen (8.8 percent) enrolled in college in 1991 reported having a disability. This is a significant change from 1978 when the proportion was about 1 in 38 freshmen, or 2.6 percent (HEATH, September-October, 1991). The following chart reflects the increase of freshmen who report having disabilities:

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Percentage of Full-Time Freshmen
Reporting Disabilities

1978	2.6
1985	7.4
1988	7.0
1991	8.8

Sight and learning disabilities are those most frequently identified by freshmen. The greatest growth in the percentage of students reporting a particular disability is in the category of learning disabilities. The following table indicates various disabilities reported by freshmen since 1985.

Disability	1985	1988	1991
Hearing	12.2%	11.6%	10.5%
Speech	4.0%	3.8%	5.4%
Orthopedic	12.1%	13.8%	13.5%
Learning disability	14.8%	15.3%	24.9%
Health related	16.2%	15.7%	14.6%
Partially sighted or blind	28.3%	31.7%	25.2%
Other	16.2%	18.5%	18.3%

(HEATH, 1991)

However, disability rates are not always accurate as they are often based on student self-reports (Boyer-Stephens, 1990). It should be noted that enrollment rates do not predict graduation or completion rates.

High School to Postsecondary Education

Most students with disabilities have been on the caseload of a special education teacher in elementary and/or secondary school. This special education teacher guides the educational program of the student and often views his or her responsibilities as ensuring that the student succeeds. This teacher acts as a liaison and a buffer between the student, other teachers, administrators, and sometimes parents and employers. This role creates a protected environment for students with disabilities. However, it can inhibit their ability to develop self-advocacy skills. In addition to their disability, these adolescents have a desire to be independent, "make it on their own" and "be like everyone else." These normal adolescent traits combined with a lack of self-advocacy skills produce an entering freshman likely to hide his or her disability as much as possible.

The transition from secondary to postsecondary education is difficult for students that have experienced frustrations and failures. Additionally, it is hard for those students who have not taken an active part in planning for their education and who are suddenly put in the position of needing to advocate for themselves in a postsecondary education setting. Students need to understand the differences between high school and college to better prepare them for the

reality of the environments. The following diagram illustrates many of the immediate differences (Shaw, Brinckerhoff, Kistler, McGuire, 1991).

Differences Between High School and College Requirements

HIGH SCHOOL		COLLEGE
• 6 hours *per day*, 180 days. Total? 1080 hours!	Class Time	• 12 hours *per week*, 28 weeks. Total? 336 hours!
• Whatever it takes to do your homework! 1-2 hours per day?	Study Time	• Rule of thumb: 2 hours of study for 1 hour of class. 3-4 hours per day?
• Weekly; at the end of a chapter; frequent quizzes.	Tests	• 2-4 per semester; at the end of a 4-chapter unit; at 8:00 a.m. on the Monday *after* Homecoming!
• *Passing* grades guarantee you a seat!	Grades	• Satisfactory academic standing = C's or above!
• Often take attendance • May check your notebooks • Put info on the blackboard • Impart knowledge and facts	Teachers	• Rarely teach you the textbook • Often lecture non-stop • Require library research • Challenge you to think
• *Structured* defines it most of the time! • Limits are set: by parents, by teachers, or by other adults.	Freedom	• The single greatest problem most college students face! • Should I go to class? • Should I plan on 4, 5, 6, or 10 hours of sleep?

Source: Shaw, Brinckerhoff, Kistler, & McGuire, (1991).

Rather than fostering dependency, teachers in secondary schools (starting in junior high) need to focus students in high school on becoming more independent thinkers, and problem solvers, and responsible for determining and advocating for their own needs. Educators in secondary schools should implement programming which encourages independence. Instruction and counseling from educators, guidance counselors and parents should help students become more self-sufficient, independent thinkers and feel empowered to make their own decisions. As secondary educators reflect on their students' skills in these areas the following questions may be useful.

1. When was the last time your students brought their notebooks to class?
2. Are class notes, handouts, old tests and quizzes dated and properly inserted in their notebooks?
3. If you told your student that the next test would cover all material from March 1 to the present, would your student have any idea what would be on the test?
4. If you asked to see today's notes from biology, would your students start searching through their pockets looking for the *scrap* they took those notes on? Or would you hear, " I left it in my locker.", or "We don't take notes there?"
5. Are your students aware of assignment pads but feel they were meant to be used by others?
6. Do you feel you are straining your budget buying pens and pencils for those students who never have either?
7. Do you ever wonder what skills you are teaching your students which will enable them to be successful and independent, both during their school years and after they

graduate?

8. When was the last time your students took responsibility for failure?

(adapted from Shaw, et. al., 1991)

Shaw et. al, and others have suggested the following strategies to help students learn necessary skills:

1. Planning for the transition from high school into postsecondary education must begin early.
2. The transitioning from junior high should include careful planning for courses of students with disabilities who choose not to receive services in high school. Students with disabilities who don not receive special education services can still obtain necessary accommodations under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act.
3. Students must actively participate in the decision making process of the IEP (including the transition component of the IEP) and of course in program selection.
4. Students must be taught to explain their disability in simple terms and how to request specific modifications and accommodations.
5. Students and parents should work together to identify strengths and weaknesses and to select appropriate postsecondary training or employment.
6. Course decisions must be made with a full understanding of the implications for transition, particularly with college-bound students.

(adapted from Shaw, et. al., 1991)

Student Perspectives

The Census Bureau (Department of Commerce) qualifies the use of the term "rural" as: "Living in the open countryside or in towns of a population of less than 2,500". The Rural Exchange (1994) defines an informal working definition: "If you think you are rural, you're rural." We surveyed students with disabilities coming from the following rural communities: Parma, MO - population 995; Linn, MO - population 1,148. These students were attending the University of Missouri and were asked a variety of questions regarding their high school career and preparation for college. Overall, there was a sense of confidence and accomplishment among the students surveyed. Each felt they were able to participate fully in campus life and that support and guidance from family members and educators enabled them to do so.

The students, however, in comparison to their peers without disabilities did not feel they received a great deal more services regarding their preparation for postsecondary institutions. Accommodations received were situation specific such as adapting a desk to be accessible, providing readers, and designating accessible parking spaces. Students report that assistance was given by a small handful of individuals within the school system, ranging in positions form principal to paraprofessionals. Support outside of the school system consisted largely of parents and grandparents who were quite active and supportive in their children's lives. Students did not perceive their vocational rehabilitation counselor as a source of support or guidance, but rather as a funding agent.

Once on campus students, as a general rule, did not immediately seek out the office of disability services. Usually they did not identify themselves to the office until a specific need arose. These needs included adaptive testing modifications, tutoring requests, and accessibility problems. Students found they used additional services as they became aware of them and as the severity of their disability progressed. Although the level of services varied with each student, all expressed satisfaction with services received.

It is also helpful to learn what suggestions students from University of Connecticut offer as solutions in preparing high school students with disabilities.

- Understand your disability and how you learn best *before* going to college.
- Develop strong study habits, especially time management skills.
- Have well developed basic skills in grammar and math.
- Build self-confidence by taking on more difficult tasks.
- Try to develop writing skills for taking essay tests.
- Develop self-advocacy skills in order to ask professors for necessary accommodations.
- Seek help as soon as admitted to college.
- Be prepared to study hard and set realistic goals.

(Shaw, et. al, 1991)

Postsecondary Success

The challenges facing college students with disabilities include the transitional issues encountered by the general student population plus specific disability-related issues. These additional challenges pose the need for additional abilities, such as those previously mentioned — self-advocacy, initiation, and time management. Once developed, students will use their acquired skills for a variety of purposes. Examples include:

- **Self Report of Disability**
  Taking the initiative to locate the office of disability support services and identifying oneself as a student with a disability is a vital first step in the accommodation process. This may be particularly difficult for students from rural areas where it was never necessary to identify themselves as having a disability because it was common knowledge. There is usually close communication in a small community such that a child enters the school system with friends and educators already aware of their disability needs, in contrast to a postsecondary setting where students may easily remain anonymous until they identify themselves.
- **Articulating Accommodation Needs**
  Once the initial step is taken it must be followed by an articulate, specific description of accommodation needs. In many instances, an educator and/or parental figure has done this for the student throughout high school and this will be a new experience that can seem quite intimidating without the appropriate knowledge and communication skills.
- **Coordinating Auxiliary Assistance**
  Frequently individuals are hired to provide auxiliary assistance (i.e., personal care

attendants, interpreters, readers) and their schedules must be coordinated by the student with a disability. This places the student in an "employer" role and requires a great deal of time management, diplomacy, and organization.

- **Making Living Arrangements**
  Adjustment to living away from home for the first time is difficult for every student. For students with disabilities from rural communities it is even more difficult. The adjustment is much greater because the size of the campus and surrounding community is often overwhelming. There are many more choices, procedures, and individuals to deal with. Students will have to advocate and negotiate housing, transportation, and financial matters. Self-advocacy and self-confidence are essential in mastering the complexity of postsecondary settings.

Summary

As increasing numbers of students with disabilities express their interest in postsecondary education, secondary school personnel must become more knowledgeable of support services in postsecondary institutions, and work together with parents to move students along from learned helplessness to independence and empowerment. Students should be encouraged to visit and talk with support personnel on the campuses where they attend classes. Usually the Students Affairs office can provide the name(s) of staff assigned to work with students who have disabilities. With the passage of Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) transition planning has effectively begun to include preparing students with disabilities for postsecondary education or for adult life.

CISE is a technical assistance and resource center funded by the Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. This new Center is a merge between two state projects each with long histories, the Special Education Dissemination Center and Missouri LINC. The Center continues to provide resources and professional development activities consisting of technical assistance to requesting school districts, conducting conferences and inservice presentations, developing free and low-cost materials, disseminating loan package materials, and answering hotline questions. The topics for these activities include inclusion, vocational and transition assessment, functional curriculum, interagency collaboration, and other topics related to special education. Missouri LINC over the past few years, has focused on providing information to educators about transition and its implementation into school district programs.

The Access Office provides postsecondary support services for students with disabilities. These services are designed to ensure equal educational opportunities in all areas of campus life. Services encompass areas such as adaptive exam accommodations, transportation, accessibility, and auxiliary aids. Access Office staff work individually with each student providing case by case consideration of accommodation needs as required by the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). As postsecondary institutions' legal responsibilities are strengthened through implementation of ADA, the role of disabled student services is strengthened as well.

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